University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

INNERVATE
Leading student work in English studies

Volume 9: 2016-17 ISSN: 2041-6776

Discuss how cinematic devices are used in order to chart the progressive psychological breakdown of the main protagonist

Frances Hannon

This essay will analyse Orson Welles's *Othello* (1952)[1], and Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985)[2], in order to explore how each director uses cinematic devices in order to articulate the mental deterioration of a main protagonist. Although vastly different, both films are created by directors who are renowned for their experimental and innovative approaches to film making. It is, therefore, interesting to consider how both directors take a similar approach within these films, by choosing to reduce dialogue and instead invest their energy into the cinematography of their adaptations. As Judith Buchanan states, Kurosawa's *Ran*, 'makes a habit of minimising or even eliminating speech whenever a moment may instead be communicated by a piece of visual drama'[3]. This observation rings true in Welles's work too, with Marguerite H. Rippy stating that, Welles's films are adaptations that conjure Shakespeare as 'image set against sound'[4]. As a result, both Buchanan and Rippy highlight how visuals have an equal, if not superior role, to the language used within their productions. With this in mind, I will be exploring how both directors frequently use various visual elements to create a communicative environment, whereby cinematic composition becomes metaphor for the internal psychologies of their protagonists. A further discussion will consider how each director's experimental approaches to film extends beyond cinematography, looking at their decisions to incorporate elements from different dramatic forms and genre's, such as, Film Noir and Noh Theatre.

I shall begin by exploring how cinematography is used in the initial stages of each film, in order to lay down the foundations of mental stability, before dismantling this throughout the course of the film. Firstly, however, it must be acknowledged that both directors create a visual iconography within the openings of their films, in order to foreshadow their protagonist's mental deterioration. Interestingly, Othello, begins with the funeral procession of Othello himself. Immediately, this has the effect of creating a dislocation of time, which foreshadows how Othello's thoughts will also become dislocated from their normal course. Likewise, in Ran, one can observe Kurosawa's obvious manipulation of the mise-en-scène during the initial moments, as he places Hidetora and his sons in a circle shape. Notably, the precise composition of this scene is reminiscent of Noh theatre, and conjures an image of wholeness, and unity. This appears to be reflective of the un-fractured mind of Hidetora, and simultaneously anticipates the breakdown of this mental stability.

Furthermore, both directors choose to highlight the physical strength of their protagonists within the initial sequences, using this as metaphor for their current mental strength. Several minutes into Othello, the narrator states that, "officers were searching the town to apprise *Othello* of this new honour"[5]. At this moment, Welles uses an establishing shot to picture Othello situated at the top of a set of stairs. Positioned above the rabble of people, he is immediately marked out as a figure of power within society. This is similar to in the opening sequence of *Ran*, where Kurosawa illustrates Hidetora's supremacy by using a low angle shot to track Hidetora as he ferociously engages in the boar hunt. Manipulation of the mise-en-scène becomes evident, as Kurosawa chooses to have Hidetora using fast and bold movements whilst adopting a particularly resonant voice. As a result, Kurosawa presents the audience with an ultra-virile protagonist, who is at the peak of his physical potential. Consequently, it would appear that both directors ask the audience to observe the physical strength of their protagonists, and regard this as being indicative of their strong and unmalleable state of mind.

Moreover, it is interesting to observe how Welles uses lighting in order to reinforce Othello's mental strength at the beginning of the film. During Othello's first meeting with Desdemona's father,

[1] *Othello*, dir. Orson Welles (Mercury Productions, 1951),*YouTube*, 22 March 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJ9bK3IUhyQ [Accessed 10 January 2017]
[2] Ran, dir. Akira Kurosawa (Greenwich Film Productions,1985), *Box of Broadcasts* https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/0013876D?bcast=121619264 [Accessed 10 January 2017]
[3] Judith. R, Buchanan, Shakespeare on Film (Oxon: Routledge, 2005), p. 83.
[4] Marguerite H. Rippy, 'Orson Welles', in *Welles, Kurosawa, Kozintsev, Zeffirelli: Great Shakespeareans* by Mark Thornton Burnett, Courtney Lehmann, Marguerite H. Rippy and Ramona Wray (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2013), p.27.
[5] *Othello*, dir. Orson Welles, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJ9bK3IUhyQ.

Othello's face appears in bright lighting. Similarly, shortly after Othello's ship returns from Cyprus, Welles pictures Othello standing outside with Desdemona, with the bright sunlight cast upon his face. Interestingly, this contrasts the shadowy darkness that engulfs his face at the end of the film when he is murdering Desdemona. The illumination of Othello's face, can thus be read as metaphorically symbolising the sense of clarity that exists within Othello's consciousness, prior to Iago's mental manipulation. Consequently, by exploiting the chiaroscuro effect, Welles is able to reveal important aspects of Othello's mind, thus making lighting an essential component of cinematography, when tracking Othello's progressive descent into mental instability.

As each film progresses, both Kurosawa and Welles begin to implement various cinematic devices in order to articulate a change in the protagonist's mental state. In Othello, Welles uses two scenes from Act III, scene iii of the original play, to portray a moment of mental transition. The first scene marks the very beginning of Othello's mental transition and takes place approximately thirty-three minutes into the film, during a conversation between Iago and Othello. During this sequence, Iago begins to sew the seed of doubt into Othello's mind about the affair. The second, is the cliff-top sequence that takes place shortly after this, when Othello demands "ocular proof" of the affair. Setting is significant in these sequences, with Welles's manipulating the outside location in order to illuminate the protagonist's state of mind. Indeed, the noticeably minimalist settings are far removed from the vast labyrinth of entangled pathways and blind alleys that have dominated the film prior to this. This helps provide less multi-layered settings, free from distractions, thus providing the spectator with ample opportunity to interrogate the transition of Othello's psychological state. Notably, throughout the second sequence, the camera continually cuts to images of the sea as it ferociously crashes against the rocks. This is accompanied by the diegetic sound of the waves; wish intensifies during Othello's moments of rage. Consequently, the combination of audial and visual elements work to echo Othello's rage as he imagines the affair and, are suggestive of a transition from a harmonious and stable mind, to one as volatile and unpredictable as the sea itself. Moreover, these images place an emphasis on the notion of movement, which, Welles reinforces in the first sequence, by the use of a long tracking shot and the continual diegetic sound of footsteps. On the one hand, the rarity of this type of shot places particular emphasis on this scene as being a pivotal moment of mental transition. However, it also appears to be mirroring the continual movement, and activeness, of Othello's consciousness. The fast tempo of the second sequence created by the use of frequent cutting therefore reinforces the idea that Othello's thoughts are running wild. Consequently, Welles creates a deliberately discontinuous style within this sequence in order to reflect upon the 'feeling of tottering instability'[6] that exists within Othello's mind.

Furthermore, aspects of the mise-en-scène such as lighting, play an equally as important role in depicting the mental transition within these sequences. During the first sequence, Welles uses a high-angle shot as Othello remarks that, "by heaven I'll know thy thought". This shot emphasises that Othello is beginning to lose his position of power due to the deterioration of his mental steadiness. Donna Pebberdy, in her discussion of the film noir Night and the City, comments on the director's use of lighting when filming the main protagonist. She states that, 'harsh lighting and framing devices accentuate his psychosis and gradual descent into madness'[7]. Consequently, Welles appears to be exploiting the cinematography of the film noir when using harsh lighting to film on Othello. The use of this lighting creates shadows that overtake the right hand side of Othello's face, making it appear half in light, and half in darkness. This differs from the lighting on his face at the beginning of the film, and echoes the arrival of a division in Othello's mind. As a result, Barbara Everett concludes that, 'shadows […] serve as punctuation marks throughout the movie'[8]. Everett highlights how Welles's innovative use of lighting becomes an indispensable device when attempting to illuminate the present division within Othello's consciousness.

Within Ran, the bloody war scene that takes place within the Azusa Castle marks out the beginning of Hidetora's psychological breakdown. Visuals are of key importance, and are exploited immediately in order to mark this scene out as a significant transitional moment in Hidetora's psychological descent. The scene begins by a series of successive shots, which show the gates of the castle closing in on themselves. Instantly, an atmosphere of entrapment is created which works to

[6] Marguerite Rippy, 'Orson Welles', in *Welles, Kurosawa, Kozintsev, Zeffirelli: Great Shakespeareans* by Mark Thornton Burnett, Courtney Lehmann, Marguerite H. Rippy and Ramona Wray (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2013), p.29.

[7] Donner Pebberdy, 'Acting and Performance in Film Noir', in *A Companion to Film Noir*, ed. by Andrew Spicer and Helen Hanson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2013), p. 320.

[8] Barbara Everett, '*Shakespeare in the Twentieth Century' in Shakespeare and the Twentieth Century: The Selected Proceedings of the International Shakespeare Association World Congress*, ed. By Jonathan Bate, Jill L. Levenson, and Dieter Mehl (London: Associated University Presses, 1998), p. 119.

foreshadow the beginning of Hidetora's descent into unescapable madness. Visuals continue to take precedence, as the camera cuts to an image of the sky and the moon. The frame is split into two; nearly equal halves, with the light of the sky consuming one-half, and the other half, consumed by the blackness of the Castles silhouette. Consequently, likewise to Welles, Kurosawa uses visuals, and the specific image of division, in order to mirror the divided mind of Hidetora as he enters a state of delirium.

Furthermore, throughout this scene, Kurosawa borrows features of Noh theatre, using the form as an 'index of emotional extremity'[9]. As James Goodwin states, 'the make-up on Tatsuya Nakadai has passed through three phases, with each phase based on specific images in the repertory of Noh masks'[10]. At the beginning of the scene, Hidetora boldly wards off the soldiers at the top of the stairs, and his face appears to be of a more naturalistic complexion. Nevertheless, as the scene develops, Hidetora takes on an increasingly mask-like appearance, with Goodwin claiming that Hidetora, by the end of the scene, has become, 'less a man than the mask of a man.'[11]. As the sequence progresses, Hidetora's face takes on a deathly pallor, with the pale make-up working to accentuate Hidetora's lined countenance. Indeed, by the end of the scene, the make-up is so thick, that it creates a debilitating effect, as Hidetora's face becomes trapped in a fixed expression of rigidity. This rigidity is reinforced by Hidetora's lack of gesture and movement as he remains motionless and wide- eyed throughout the scene. Consequently, Kurosawa appears to be using an image of motionlessness and physical decay, as a metaphor for the breakdown of an active and sound mind.

In continuation, the camera then proceeds to cut, once again, to an image of clouds shifting. Mark Thornton Burnett remarks that, 'as characters lose their psychic and geographical frames of reference, (…) the camera focuses on clouds forming and reforming, and swirling mists, as metaphors of movement, change and unpredictability.'[12]. On the one hand, the focus on the external elements metaphorically highlights a shift in Hidetora's psyche. Nevertheless, it also highlights Kurosawa's preference of long shots, and his apparent resistance to extreme close-up shots of Hidetora throughout the scene. The lack of close up shots helps create a distance between the audience and Hidetora, which indicates an impossibility to understand, or connect with Hidetora, due to his inability to function at a sane, or even human, level. Interestingly, Welles creates a similar effect in the scenes of mental transition, by his frequent use of over-the-shoulder shots. Collectively, Welles uses five shots of this type in the cliff-top scene, with each having the effect of distancing Othello from the audience, by denying the opportunity to follow Othello's direct eye line. André Bazin refers to Welles's refusal to allow the spectator a clear vision of the protagonist. The effect of this, according to Bazin, is that it causes the spectator to become 'acutely conscious of the ambivalence of reality'[13]. Bazin draws attention to how Welles creates a feeling of uncertainty by denying the spectator a clear vision of Othello's eye line. Arguably, this atmosphere of uncertainty reflects upon the doubts and mixed emotions that exist within Othello's mind at this moment in time.

Moreover, within the castle scene of Ran, Kurosawa appears to devote as much care to sound, as he does to the visual elements. It is intriguing that Kurosawa decides to have non-diegetic music playing throughout the majority of this sequence, due to its absence throughout the rest of the film. As a result, this change in sound appears to mark this out as a pivotal moment of mental transition. Notably, the music is characteristically balletic in tone, thus, its slow-tempo juxtaposes the speed at which the destruction is taking place. Consequently, a discord between the visual and the audial is created, which, is reinforced by the quietness of the diegetic sound. In relation to this, Judith Buchanan comments on the similar discrepancy between action and consequences within this scene, stating that, 'the usual bond between action and consequences seems to have been severed completely, and something in our appreciation of the scene is correspondingly numbed'[14]. Buchanan draws attention to the unexpected outcomes within this scene, particularly when one considers Hidetora's ability to escape unharmed from the burning castle that he has voluntarily chose to sit in. Therefore, Buchanan reinforces the idea of dislocation between sight and sound within this scene. Effectively, these different elements work to create a numbing effect, which mirrors Hidetora's mind as he loses sight of his rational and

[9] Mark Thornton Burnett, 'Akira Kurosawa' in *Welles, Kurosawa, Kozintsev, Zeffirelli: Great Shakespeareans*, p. 84.
[10] James Goodwin, *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 206.
[11] *Ibid*., p. 206.
[12] Mark Thornton Burnett, *op.cit*., p. 80.
[13] André Bazin, 'A New Relationship Between Camera and Object', in *Orson Welles: An investigation into his films and philosophy*, ed. by Maurice Bessy (New York: Crown Publishers, 1971), p. 149.
[14] Judith Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Film*, p.83.

emotional thoughts. Subsequently, Kurosawa transports the audience into a trance-like state of disbelief, and this, in turn, echoes the dream-like state of Hidetora as he mechanically descends from the castle in the midst of insanity.

Finally, I will look at how each director uses cinematic devices in order to represent each protagonist at the peak of their mental instability. Within Ran, Kurosawa continues to use sound to illustrate the mental psyche of his protagonist. During the scene in which Hidetora, Tango, and kyoami sit in Tsurumaru's house, Tsurumaru plays the Nohkah flute. Conventionally, in Noh theatre, the flute is used to express the main characters state of mind, and Kurosawa appears to be exploiting this convention within this scene, as the flute reaches an intensely shrill and eerie pitch that is indicative of Hidetora's internal hysteria. Donald Richie remarks on how the percussive sound of Noh music is characterised by its irregular silences, and it appears that Kurosawa exploits this discontinuous style in order to mirror the disjointedness within Hidetora's mind[15]. Furthermore, shortly after Lady Kaede demands the head of Lady Sué, Hidetora and the fool walk through the wasteland, and the removal of non-diegetic sound highlights just how quiet Hidetora's voice has become. Indeed, Hidetora fails to utter a single word until several minutes into the scene, which emphasises his physical weakness. Consequently, this becomes metaphor for his mental weakness and his apparent inability to articulate, or even formulate, any coherent thoughts.

A final addition of subjective camera work is used immediately after the pivotal moment when Hidetora jumps off the cliff in a moment of sheer despair. After Hidetora has fell to the floor, he is pictured among the rubble occupying just a small fragment of the frame. This signifies the transition from virile warlord, to, quite literally, a fallen master. Notably, this contrasts with how Hidetora's perspective is represented initially in the first castle, when he looks down upon his own concubines and household servants. Consequently, the change in perspective, translates to a final illustration of mental transition.

Within Othello, it is shortly after the eavesdropping scene, where the arrival of Othello's breakdown can be witnessed. As Bianca remarks, "This is some minx's token!" the cinematography becomes increasingly expressionistic. In reference to this, Jorgen's remarks that there are two disparate styles within the film, one being the 'Othello style' and the other, the 'Iago style'. He remarks that the Iago style is identified by 'grotesque shadows and tortured compositions'[16], due to Iago being the 'agent of chaos'[17] within the film. In support of this, one can observe how immediately after this moment, the angles of frame become increasingly skewed, thus illustrating Othello's world losing its equilibrium. The screen becomes a nest of shadows and bars and creates a feeling of claustrophobia, which forces the audience to close in on the universe of the protagonist. Additionally, it also works to directly impose the destiny of Othello onto the audience, by accentuating a sense of imprisonment that is reflective of Othello's entrapment within Iago's world of destructiveness. Indeed, Aaron Cutler states that, 'wholeness eventually gives way to fragmentation, as frames shatter into shards in accordance with Othello's mind'[18]. This is evident within these moments as frames are continually broken up by grids and bars, thus reflecting upon the broken mind of Othello.

Furthermore, throughout these minutes, Welles heightens the movements between lightness and darkness upon Othello's face in order to express Othello's internally battling elements. As Maurice Bassey states, 'touches of shadow spread and devour' as the film develops. As Othello contemplates Desdemona's misdeeds and asks, "What sense had I of her stol'n hours of lust?", his face appears behind grids and engulfed by such darkness that he is barely distinguishable. As Bazin states, 'essential lines are spoken at the exact moment when the actor is least well lit'[19]. Indeed, Welles's refusal to allow the spectator a clear view of Othello, works to de-value the importance of his dialogue, now that he speaks as a deluded man. Furthermore, the inability to see Othello clearly during these pivotal moments of doubt simultaneously reflects upon Othello's complete lack of clarity within his consciousness. As the cutting becomes increasingly rapid, a sense of disorientation becomes apparent, and as the sounds of seagulls strike, Othello is finally pictured open-mouthed upon the floor. A final point-of-view shot is utilised to gaze upon the onlookers with the framing of the camera, once again, shifting to a tilted position. Subsequently this reinforces the complete lack of balance within Othello's warped mind, and, the arrival of a deluded and mentally broken protagonist.

---

[15] Donald Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1998), p. 217.
[16] Jack. J Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Film* (Indiana: University Press of America, 1991), p.177; quoted in Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Discovering Orson Welles* (California: University of California Press, 2007), p.169.
[17] *Ibid.,* p.177.
[18] Aaron Cutler, *Rep Diary: Othello* (Film Society of Lincoln Center, 2014) http://www.filmcomment.com/blog/othello-orson-welles/ [Accessed 13 January 2017]
[19] André Bazin, *op.cit*., p. 149.

In conclusion, both directors construct a form of cinematic punctuation, where the visual becomes the language that conveys meaning. In taking a formalistic approach, they both show a great consideration for the synthesis of various cinematic components, which work together to collectively present a highly personalised vision of the world. Orson Welles's use of expressionistic lighting, and his liberal use of camera angles, are particularly effective, and are indicative of a desire to create a specific type of cinematic representation where the external is regulated in order to focus on the inner turmoil of his protagonist. Indeed, Kurosawa takes a similar approach, exploiting the work of the actor, production, camera, and the edit, in order to depict a character in emotional chaos. Kurosawa's implementation of features from Noh theatre are particularly useful in assisting him in accentuating the transition from a mentally stable protagonist, to an irrefutably hysterical one. Consequently, the apparent rejection of naturalism by both directors, and the decision to opt for a more vivid and creative mise-en-scène, means that both directors are able to illustrate characters who, ultimately, suffer from contradictory and continually changing impulses. As is typical for auteur filmmakers, style is what comes to underpin both of these films, enabling them to stamp their own mark on their material. Ultimately, however, their styles and trust in composition is what makes these films so successful in their ability to meaningfully transcribe the subjective worldview of the protagonist to the audience.

Bibliography

Anderegg, Michael, *Orson Welles, Shakespeare, and Popular Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

Bate, Jonathan, et al, eds., *Shakespeare and the Twentieth Century: The Selected Proceedings of the International Shakespeare Association World Congress* (London: Associated University Presses, 1998).

Bessy, Maurice, *Orson Welles: An investigation into his films and philosophy* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1971).

Buchanan, Judith, *Shakespeare on Film (*Harlow: Pearson Education, 2005).

Cutler, Aaron, 'Rep Diary: Othello', *Film Comment* (May 2014) http://www.filmcomment.com/blog/othello-orson-welles/ [Accessed 13 Janurary 2017]

Goodwin, James, *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994).

Hindle, Maurice, *Shakespeare on Film,* 2nd edn (London: Palgrave, 2015).

Jess-Cooke, Carolyn, *Shakespeare on Film: Such Things as Dreams Are Made of* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007).

Kurosawa, Akira, *Ran,* (Greenwich Film Productions,1985), *Box of Broadcasts* https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/0013876D?bcast=121619264 [Accessed 10 January 2017]

M. Buhler, Stephen, *Shakespeare in the Cinema: Ocular Proof* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002).

Orpen, Valerie, *Film Editing: The Art of the Expressive* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003).

Prince, Stephen, *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999).

Richie, Donald, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa,* 3rd edn (Oakland: University of California Press, 1999).

Ridley, M.R, ed., *Othello* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1968).

Rosenbaum, Jonathan, *Discovering Orson Welles* (California: University of California Press, 2007).

Shaughnessy, Robert, ed., *Shakespeare on Film: Contemporary Critical Essays* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998).

Spicer, Andrew and Helen Hanson, eds., *A Companion to Film Noir* (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2013).

Thornton Burnett, Mark, et al, eds., *Welles, Kurosawa, Kozintsev, Zeffirelli: Great Shakespeareans, Volume XVII* (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2013).

Welles, Orson, *Othello*, (Mercury Productions, 1951),*YouTube,* 22 March 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJ9bK3IUhyQ [Accessed 10 January 2017]